

## **Dibaajimowinan: Four Stories of Resurgence in Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg Territory**

Damien Lee

August 15, 2011

<http://dibaajimowin.wordpress.com>

### **Coming Home through Active Presence - Project Introduction**

Aapji'sh go baatiinad wi zhiwi gewii zhidgo gye endgog ge-naanaagdowendngiba wiya: There is a lot in there [the story] for one to think about.

- Elder William Trudeau (Ojibwe Cultural Foundation 2011, n.p.)

Telling stories about who we are as Anishinabek fosters the renewal and strengthening of our nation despite on-going occupation of our lands by the Canadian state. Our stories are powerful: they embody our relationships with our ecologies (McLeod 2007, 19-32). They are the sounds of those relationships, and encoded within them are teachings that tell us the ways to be Anishinabe within a specific place. And when we voice those stories, we locate ourselves as beings inseparable from the ecologies from which we come, resonating a relationship that is not, and cannot be broken by colonialism.

Yet colonialism has impacted our relationships to our territories and, by extension, to Anishinabe-inaadiziwin (our way of being).<sup>1</sup> We must admit that over 500 years of colonial attacks have ripped holes in the fabric of our relationships within our places. But colonialism was unsuccessful in extermination: we are still here. And today we are darning those holes by reconnecting with our traditions, places and ways of being. Our resurgence is deepening these connections.

---

<sup>1</sup> Geniusz 2009, 9.

Our stories mend the holes caused by colonialism because they demonstrate presence within our territories. Presencing is about being active within our relationships to our lands, which disrupts colonial control over us because we renew our relationships with the places currently occupied by settler society (Betasamosake 2011, 96). This restrengthens identity in a colonial context because, as Kimberly Blaeser (1999) has noted, it is "Through speaking, hearing, and retelling [our stories that] we affirm our relationship with our nations, our tribal communities, our family networks. We begin to understand our position in the long history of our people. [W]e become the stories we tell..." (54). Within Anishinabemowin,<sup>2</sup> the words dibaajimowin (singular) and dibaajimowinan (plural) define personal stories that arise within the context of one's everyday life, but which also embody teachings that might be useful to other people trying to live their life within a certain way.

This project is about sharing dibaajimowinan imbued with decolonizing potential due to their being a manifestation of active presence. Available in written and in audio form on the Internet, I share stories here that demonstrate a resurgence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin and presence in Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg territory. Presencing is key because when we are present in a colonial context we are transcending colonial attempts to erase Anishinabek.

I have been thinking about the concept of presencing for some time now, but had been using different terminology. It was Betasamosake's (Leanne Simpson) (2011)

---

<sup>2</sup> The Anishinabe language

recent book *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*, that expanded my understanding of this concept as a form of resistance and sovereignty. Whereas I had been thinking about presencing as a way to assert sovereignty in the way Patricia Monture-Angus (1999) defines it - namely, a responsibility to carry our relationships to others and the land in a good way (36) - Betasamosake's work helped me reconceptualize this sovereignty and, indeed, the idea of decolonization, by broadening my understanding of the concepts of presence and space: colonialism does not only occupy our lands, it also occupies our minds, bodies and narratives, and re-occupying these spaces is a form of resurgence and resistance. In many ways, then, dibaajimowinan that demonstrate resurgence or resistance to colonialism are a form of presencing: they provide a space for other Anishinabek to *be* in and to see themselves within. This is powerful, as colonialism attempts to make all spaces unsafe for Anishinabek.

In terms of locating my own presence within this project, I was a visitor in Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg territory. I am Anishinabek through custom adoption, as I was adopted into my family and community - Fort William First Nation, located on the northwest shore of Lake Superior - when I was a baby, in 1981. I grew up both on and off my reserve, but Fort William First Nation is my home, and I look towards it regardless of where I might be physically located, or in whatever work or studying I might be doing at a given time. So when I say "we" or "us" or "our" in this dibaajimowin, I am speaking from my position as an Anishinabe person that feels a strong sense of accountability to my family and my community. And while this project took place in another Anishinabek community and nation, meaning my focus

was offering what I could to that community, my presence at over the summer of 2011 was in a way a connection between two Anishinabe communities in the name of liberation. Here, I focus specifically on decolonization, something I have been committed to since I was about ten years old; this project marks my latest step and contribution in such a process.

In what follows, you will hear podcasts about actions of resurgence within Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg territory that I participated in, supported and reflected upon within the context of a Community Governance Project - the final step in completing my Master's of Arts degree through the Indigenous Governance program at the University of Victoria (based in what is currently Victoria, British Columbia, Canada). Resurgence in this project is conceptualized as an act of looking inward towards Anishinabek teachings and embodying those intellectual traditions, political traditions, and knowledges in one's life (Betasamosake 2011, 39-42, 54). Resurgence is a process akin to picking up pieces of Anishinabe knowledge and traditions that were left for us along the pathways our ancestors walked during their lives and during their experiences under colonialism (Benton-Benai 1988, 92-3). Picking up such knowledges is found in learning "songs, dances, values, or philosophies, and bring[ing] them into existence into the future" (Betasamosake 2011, 50). What follows are four stories that demonstrate how I saw the emergence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin throughout my time at Waawshkigaamagki during the summer of 2011.

A key part of resurgence is that we must recognize that our minds are colonized to various degrees as a result of 500 years of cognitive imperialism.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing this, we must be careful when trying to decolonize ourselves or our communities for, as Taiaiake Alfred (2009) notes, we might unknowingly perpetuate or even protect the colonial order if we are not acutely aware of the threads of colonized thinking that run through our heads (94). It is for this reason that I must employ a lens or theoretical framework that serves the dual purpose of making visible aspects of resurgence in a way that does not recolonize myself, the narratives or the people I worked within during this project. To achieve this, I use a framework known as biskaabiiyang.

I was inspired by Betasamosake's (2011) most recent book in which she interprets and discusses an Anishinabek decolonization theory called biskaabiiyang (49-54). Biskaabiiyang is an Anishinabe decolonizing theoretical framework meaning to return to ourselves (Geniusz 2009, 9, 105). It is a process of retracing our steps to pick-up the knowledge left for us along the trail by our ancestors (Benton-Benai 1988, 92-3). When I discussed this term with Gitigaa-Migize (Doug Williams) during this project, he interpreted biskaabiiyang as "coming fully into bloom; suddenly, you are Nishnaabeg; it's like popping into bloom."<sup>4</sup> Biskaabiiyang interpreted this way is a powerful way to think about resurgence, for it is a process of becoming more fully Anishinabe today. As such, I use biskaabiiyang to frame this project because it is a culturally-based decolonization framework that fosters

---

<sup>3</sup> According to Marie Battiste (2000), "Cognitive imperialism, also a form of cultural racism, is the imposition of one worldview on a people who have an alternate worldview, with the implication that the imposed worldview is superior to the alternate worldview" (192-3).

<sup>4</sup> Gitigaa-Migize. Waawshkigaamagki. 10 August 2011.

the renewal of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin within me, and allows me to interpret the events that took place for their contribution to the resurgence of Anishinabe teachings and ways of being. Engaging in biskaabiiyang means that we think carefully about how our actions and the actions of those around us might perpetuate colonialism and then take action to replace those behaviours with behaviour that embodies Anishinabe-gikendaasowin and inaadiziwin (Betasamosake 2011, 49-58).

This means that engaging in a process of biskaabiiyang requires a constant evaluation of colonialism within individuals and communities (Betasamosake 2011, 52). It is a process of looking internally, towards one's self to evaluate for cognitive imperialism within our thinking and behaviour. At times I engage evaluation in the podcasts and analyses here as an aspect of biskaabiiyang in order to identify threads of colonialism within the events I engaged in and, more importantly, to demarcate them so other Anishinabek interested in decolonization can consider what I have learned within the context of their own lives. For example, whereas Deloria notes that "Most non-Indians see in tribal religions the experiences and reverence that are missing in their own heritage" yet are unable to "put the religion into practice" (Deloria 1994, 281), what does it mean to promote resurgence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin if the safe spaces we create, such as ceremonies, become dominated with New Age adherents seeking to be saved from modernity by accessing "Native Spirituality" while not putting down core Eurocentric worldviews? How do we discern between people and events that will actually contribute to resurgence, and those that subtly reproduce colonialism? How do we use these reflections to create spaces that are increasingly efficacious for Anishinabek

resurgence? Biskaabiiyang relies on Anishinabek teachings to ensure such questions are answered in a way promotes Anishinabe-inaadiziwin rather than more assimilation.

Betasamosake (2011) highlights several important teachings to help guide actions of resistance and resurgence within a biskaabiiyang framework. One with particular importance to the following podcasts and analyses is the teaching of aanjigone: a teaching that asks us to be careful when making decisions, and promotes non-interference in the actions of others (54). Embodying this teaching means that when change and transformation happen. Such changes promote Anishinabe-inaadiziwin and prevent further assimilation of our mind and behaviour (54). One way this is done is by critiquing the situation instead of focusing the individual. It does not mean we should turn the other cheek but, rather, that we should engage our whole selves as Anishinabek, including our spiritual selves, in our every action. I employ aanjigone in the following podcasts and analyses as I am evaluating myself and the events I participated in during this project, but mean to do so in a way that promotes resurgence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin instead of criticizing people and ending there. My process is to offer ideas about how future resurgence work within the Anishinabek communities can continue to ward-off assimilation.

As mentioned above, engaging a biskaabiiyang process requires personal and collective reflection. Much of this reflection took place within discussions I had with Gitigaa-Migize and others throughout the summer, which are reflected in the

podcasts and analyses provided here.<sup>5</sup> I also had conversations with other people who were a part of a main group working with Gitigaa-Migize for resurgence, including Betasamosake and Waaseya'sin (Christine Sy). 'Conversation' has been recognized as an acceptable Indigenous research method in that it is a "non-structured method of gathering knowledge" (Kovach 2009, 51). It differs from the method of 'interview' in that it is a "combination of reflection, story and dialogue" that requires actively participating in relationships with the people one is conversing with (Kovach 2009, 51). In other words, conversation allows me to locate myself subjectively within the relationships I held during this project, which is an important aspect of research when working with Anishinabek communities (Dumont 1976). It allows me to bridge the gap between simultaneously being an outsider and insider, which Linda Smith (1999) has identified as one the hurdles Indigenous peoples face when working with their own or other Indigenous communities (137-40). This gap between insider and outsider is narrowed, however, through conversations as I, a university student, do not control the direction of what is discussed. The conversations take on their own direction where both speakers take the lead. I draw on these conversations in the podcasts and written analyses to frame on-going resurgence in a way that might support future resurgence initiatives.

The primary person I spoke with throughout this project was Gitigaa-Migize, who has been supporting and leading Nishnaabeg resurgence for decades. Gitigaa-

---

<sup>5</sup> The Indigenous Governance ethics document "Protocols & Principles For Conducting Research in an Indigenous Context" was followed when speaking with people during this project. Each person mentioned in my podcasts and written analyses gave consent after being informed about my project goals, and each person reviewed the text prior to submitting my text and podcast transcripts to my project committee. The Protocols & Principles document can be downloaded at <http://web.uvic.ca/igov/uploads/pdf/Indigenous%20Research%20Protocols.pdf>



Migize is also my community supervisor within the context of this Community Governance Project. He is recognized as a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg Elder and knowledge holder, and also holds the position of Director of Studies in Trent University's Indigenous Studies PhD program.

My engagement with Gitigaa-Migize and the community of Anishinabek he works with began well before commencement of this project. I had lived in Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg territory for two years prior to entering the Indigenous Governance program, as I had completed my Bachelor of Art's degree at Trent University in the years 2008 to 2010. While there, I became part of a community of Anishinabek/Nishnaabeg that included Gitigaa-Migize and the other people in the group that I worked with in this Community Governance Project.

Working with Gitigaa-Migize leading up to leaving Michi Saagiig Territory for Victoria in August 2010 meant that my relationship with him had progressed to the point where a certain degree of trust was reached. Building on this trust, my work with him during this project could be framed within an apprenticeship framework.

Betasamosake (2000) notes apprenticeship is one way through which Anishinabe-inaadiziwin and gikendaasowin are passed on to new generations, where knowledge seekers work with knowledge holders in the context of knowledge sharing (176-7).

This model of knowledge sharing is in itself decolonizing, as it de-centers the academy - still largely a colonial institution despite the on-going fight to legitimate Indigenous Studies and Native Studies departments on their own terms - centering instead Indigenous knowledge holders. But the term apprentice does not fully resonate within Anishinabek intellectual traditions, as this English word connotes a

meaning of exclusivity or hierarchy; my work with Gitigaa-Migize was not predicated on being the sole cup which he filled with knowledge; nor was I the only person supporting his work. On the contrary, I was one of several women and men he worked with from May until August 2011, many of whom are more permanently located in Michi Saagiig Territory than I.

As such, the term shkaabewis was used to reflect the nature of my relationship with Gitigaa-Migize during this project. According to Anton Treuer (2011), traditionally, “Both religious and sociopolitical chiefs had headmen, or helpers, usually referred to as *oshkaabewisag*. The *oshkaabewisag* played an essential cultural role, for they ensured the enforcement of decisions and usually oversaw much of the communication and summons to council” (29). While the term shkaabewis comes not without debate within the contemporary context,<sup>6</sup> working as a shkaabewis with Gitigaa-Migize within a decolonizing context gave me the opportunity to learn about decolonization from within Nishnaabeg teachings because I was with him most of the time and he included me as his helper in many ceremonies and other projects that support resurgence. I discuss my actions as a shkaabewis in more detail in the second dibaajimowin, *Ceremonies and Good Relationships*.

When in discussions with Gitigaa-Migize and others from the Peterborough area, it became clear that defining the scope and goals of the project too early might actually limit the project’s contribution to resurgence, as opportunities for

---

<sup>6</sup> There is debate regarding the gendered use of the term shkaabewis; some feel that it should not be an exclusively male role. I asked Gitigaa-Migize about this issue: he said it is up to each generation to re-apply the teachings in our own way (Waawshkigaamagki, 10 August 2011). He also mentioned the word wiidookaaze, which he felt is more common to describe women helpers/apprentices. However, the debate continues in some circles as to whether either shkaabewis and wiidookaaze should define gendered roles.

resurgence within a colonial context are themselves emergent - for example, it is almost impossible to predict exactly how settler society is going to try to suppress Anishinabek, but we can expect that it will happen in some form today. So my work had to be reflexive enough to act within flux. I arrived in what is currently southern Ontario with the intention to support the resurgence of Anishinabe inaadiziwin in what ever way Gitigaa-Migize thought important. This demanded a broad scope, and ultimately meant that I engaged in a variety of activities over the summer - many of which are discussed in the podcasts here. The range of activities I engaged in and conversations I had with the core group of people working with Gitigaa-Migize resulted in narratives thick with conceptualizations of Anishinabe biskaabiiyang: the trick for me in the podcasts and analyses here is to bring out what I believe to be some important teachings about resurgence from the experiences I had in Michi Saagiig Territory over the summer of 2011. It is for this reason that I call the following four stories dibaajimowinan, as they have teachings embedded within them.

### **The Dibaajimowinan**

I chose to provide dibaajimowinan as podcasts as well as an analysis of each dibaajimowin within the framework of biskaabiiyang in order to share how my experiences have affected me both personally and academically. Verbally telling a story about the events, ceremonies, conversations and incidents I was a part of during this Community Governance Project allows me to put myself into an experience instead of talking about it as if I could separate myself from it; each dibaajimowin is an expression of my own perspectives where other people were

usually present and participating, and as such represent only my voice unless I quote others or provide an audio recording of conversations I had with them.

Included with each dibaajimowin are written analyses, which are meant to couple my own personal stories with an academic review of the subject matter covered in the dibaajimowinan. Some written analyses closely follow the content of their adjoining dibaajimowinan, while others diverge from the content of my personal narratives to cover complementary grounds as a way to frame the resurgence I speak about in the podcasts. Each podcast and their analyses are located on the Internet, on a blog site entitled *Dibaajimowinan: Four Stories of Resurgence in Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg Territory* (available at <http://dibaajimowin.wordpress.com>). Further, this written report, which includes all podcast transcripts and analyses from the blog site, is also available on the University of Victoria's Indigenous Governance program website (<http://web.uvic.ca/igov>).

However, using a podcast format to share dibaajimowinan is not without limitations. For example, Betasamosake (2011) has noted that digitized versions of our dibaajimowinan have limited effect because they are less dynamic than oral stories told to a live audience, meaning they have less power to transform our world (34). I interpret this to mean the power of digitized stories is truncated because they are static tellings that cannot be adapted to meet the needs of unique audiences. Another limitation, more generally, is that all stories are never complete: we cannot ever fully know the meanings within our narratives for our understandings of them evolve as they continue to make more sense within our lives through on-going

reflection (McLeod 2007, 8). The podcasts shared here are therefore limited by the amount of time I have had to reflect on the meanings within my experiences (i.e. three months), and will deepen with more reflection after this project is officially complete.<sup>7</sup>

Recognizing these limitations, I provide the podcasted versions of my dibaajimowinan on the Internet as a way to share my story with the broader Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg nation, as well as other Anishinabek communities such as my own (which is located about 1,300 km away). I will also continue to tell these stories in my own way, unique each time, to people in the future due to the nature of experience: it stays with you, informing your thinking long after the project is finished. Retelling that knowledge in a way that remains true is a way to continue honouring the experiences I had within the scope of this Community Governance Project.

The four dibaajimowinan I share here follow a narrative arch that, overall, examine the current colonial context while visioning ways toward non-colonized Anishinabek nations. I do not purport to know the best way to a non-colonized future, but my dibaajimowinan and analyses here are shared as potential next steps toward that larger goal. The first dibaajimowin is about creating safe spaces for Anishinabe to come together to simply live as Anishinabek. This podcast is coupled with an analysis where I ask, *For whom are these spaces safe?*, opening the doorway to critically discuss the issue of neoliberal settlers occupying Nishnaabeg spaces for their own goals instead of actually becoming part of a broader resurgence of

---

<sup>7</sup> The project was completed on 15 August 2011.

Anishinabe-inaadiziwin; in that analysis, I draw on critiques of adherents to the “New Age” as examples.

In the second podcast, I share my dibaajimowin about why ceremonies are key to resurgence. Drawing on a number of examples that took place during this project, this dibaajimowin locates ceremony as an important source of Anishinabe-knowledge, from which flows the teachings we can interpret within our current context. The analysis that accompanies this dibaajimowin argues that relationships and ceremonies are key to resurgence because it is through relationship and ceremony that knowledge flows as an unstoppable gift within a colonial context because such knowledge underlies the rest of our anti-colonial work: our resistance to colonialism is fortified by knowing who we are, and by continuously deepening this self-knowledge we embody resurgence.

The third dibaajimowin is about being present in the land, and how this is both a responsibility of self-determining Nishnaabeg while also often deemed criminal activity within the eyes of the state and settler society. The state occupies Nishnaabeg territory then harasses us with laws, enforcers of such laws and normalized racism within the broader realm of settler society. But when we go to our lands to renew our relationships, we encounter the double edge of biskaabiiyang: renewing our relationships by being present on our ancestral lands often means fighting with settlers at some point or in some way. The key here, and the core of my third dibaajimowin and its accompanying analysis, is that “presencing” ourselves on our lands asks us to do so *as Anishinabek* by embodying the teachings of those lands within our behaviour, a process that, in turn, renews

our identity as Anishinabek. Being on the land, literally knowing it through presence, is a form of resistance, fosters resurgence, and is ultimately a form of sovereignty (Monture-Angus 1999, 36).

Lastly, my fourth dibaajimowin is about the power of critical reflection, and the importance of anti-colonial conversations where people openly discuss how their minds are colonized and what they can do about it. Both the dibaajimowin and the accompanying analysis discuss various aspects of how we can evaluate ourselves in order to vision a future where we do not unknowingly perpetuate colonialism. Each podcast and its accompanying analysis draws on the conversations I had with a core group of Anishinabek who are engaging directly in biskaabiiyang.

Each story is an illocution: a telling of resurgence *as well as* a manifestation of resurgence. Additionally, they are spaces in which to facilitate more resurgence of Anishinabe-inaadiziwin. Speaking our truths within a colonial context inevitably results in many truths, as each person experiences colonialism and decolonization in their own way.<sup>8</sup> There is nothing I can say that will explain how colonialism affects you in your life that you don't already know. But my stories here might be similar to yours, or they might be of some use to you in the future. Whereas colonialism seeks to erase and silence us, speaking our stories together in resistance to colonial occupation is in and of itself a resurgence of Anishinabek strength and presence. The Canadian state and its colonial order will not be here forever. We can renew our presence and strengthen our nations now to meet the new opportunities that continue to emerge as we engage in biskaabiiyang.

---

<sup>8</sup> Gitigaa-Migize. Waawshkigaamagki. 10 August 2011.